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Connecting the Ibādī Network in North Africa with the Empire (2nd–3rd/8th–9th Centuries)

Abstract: At first sight, North African Ibādism emerged during the Berber uprisings against Umayyad and ‘Abbāsīd rule and stayed at the margins of the empire. The imamate of Tāhart even stood, in the posthumous memory of the school, as an ideal counter-model of the caliphate. In fact, during the 8th and 9th centuries western Ibādism remained under the influence of its eastern strongholds, in particular Baṣra where the sectarian elite was well integrated into ‘Abbāsīd culture. Intense scholarly exchange linked west and east thanks to intermediary meeting points like Mecca and Fuṣṭāṭ. The Ibādī political opposition of ‘Berber’ and ‘Arab’ ethnicity certainly worked against the imperial discourse, but the Persian *shu‘ūbiyya* shaped it. The Rustamid imamate came to be the symbol of a Persian state in a Berber milieu and its capital and state apparatus underwent a gradual orientalization. Trade also played a key role in connecting the Ibādī network with the empire. Baṣra was a notorious emporium and Ibādī merchants circulated widely between the ‘Abbāsīd realm and its western fringes. The Maghribīs owned stores in Fuṣṭāṭ and traveled as far as Baghdad and Sāmarrā’. Trans-Saharan trade, including slaves and gold, also presumably saw its first development thanks to imperial demand.

Keywords: Ibādism; North Africa; Rustamid state; *shu‘ūbiyya*; cultural contacts; trading networks

Introduction

The Ibādī cluster in North Africa emerged in the global revolutionary context that characterized the last decade of the Umayyads. The first uprisings were mostly led by Ṣufrī leaders;¹ the Ibādīs did not engage in the struggle for the domination of Tripolitania before 131 H/748 CE. They formally declared their first imamate in asserting leadership over the Warfajūma rival confederation in 141 H/

¹ Scholars such as Lewinstein 1992 have wondered what *ṣufrīyya* really meant. In North Africa, Sunni and Ibādī writers used this word to designate the *khārījī* hard line, in contrast with the Ibādī openness to sectarian coexistence.

758 CE. However, the first two *imāms*, Abū l-Khaṭṭāb al-Ma‘āfirī and Abū Ḥātim al-Malzūzī, failed at creating a lasting state and were unable to resist the ‘Abbāsīd re-conquest of Ifrīqiya (144–156 H/761–772 CE).² Despite this, the *da‘wa* continued to fuel Berber rural settlements situated at the borders of the pro-‘Abbāsīd area. A new imamate was rooted further west in Tāhart (160 H/777 CE), not far from a former late antique establishment that was already part of an autonomous Berber polity.³ The city soon became a flourishing commercial and cultural hub, and relations between the ruling Rustamid dynasty and neighboring polities, including the Aghlabids, stabilized.⁴

At first sight, the political and social structures of western Ibāḍism during the 8th and 9th centuries seem to fully contradict the Umayyad and ‘Abbāsīd imperial standards. The first writings of the sect, whether penned a few decades after the ‘Abbāsīd revolution or a century later in North Africa, emphasize the imamate as a virtuous leadership opposed to the political hubris supposedly embodied by the eastern caliphs. As an heir of the Khārijī nebula, Ibāḍism advocated for a collegial model of government based on an *imām*’s election, with the consequent possibility of his overthrow if constant political and religious consultations (*shūra*) deemed him unsatisfactory. Under this model, an accomplished *imām* was a virtuous leader with an ascetic contempt for personal ambition and enrichment.⁵ The first of the Rustamids, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Rustam, perfectly epitomized this idealized figure.⁶

Early literature depicted the ‘Men in Black’ as persecutors and held dissent (*khurūj*) to be a condition for the free ‘manifestation’ (*ẓuhūr*) of the imamate.⁷ The Ibāḍī school of law thus legalized rebellion against the “tyrants” and the “*imāms* of misguidance” but at the same time encouraged the *qa‘ada*: living peacefully with other Muslims and even concealing one’s true faith if necessary.⁸

When the paramount state of Tāhart fell to the Fāṭimids in 296 H/909 CE, coexistence became vital.⁹ However, in reaction writings from the 11th century onward further emphasized the dichotomy between the idealized model of the Rus-

2 ‘Abd al-Razzāq 1985.

3 Cadénat 1977–1979; Cadénat 1988.

4 Dangel 1977; Baḥāz 2010.

5 Gaiser 2010; Aillet 2015b.

6 Aillet 2011, 64–66, 68–73.

7 See the apologia of Ibn Sallām, *Kitāb Ibn Sallām*, 83, 95–99, 110–111, 121, 128–129, and an analysis in Aillet 2015a, 74–75.

8 See for instance Ibn Dhakwān, *Sīra*, 144–145.

9 Aillet 2016.

tamid imamate and the oppressive power of the empire.¹⁰ It is no surprise, then, that scholarly works mostly perceived the western Ibāḍī territories as marginal lands alien to the imperial cultural, economic and political spheres, and hostile to it. Abdallah Laroui, for instance, saw Khārijism in North Africa as a “national schismatic movement”. He sharply opposed the Mediterranean coast, where empire succeeded empire, to a free “Middle West” that always resisted foreign influence.¹¹

This essay aims to move beyond doctrinal opposition and binary ideological construction by reconnecting the imperial center with the heterodox belt that stretched from Tripolitania to the central African highlands. A promising path for the study of the Maghrib lies in understanding how eastern or imperial influence affected local autonomies. A centralistic approach inherited from the colonial and nation-state tradition sometimes fails to correctly explain local societies by simply opposing the imperial state-civilization and the chaotic tribal patchwork of the so-called ‘marginal’ lands—in Khaldūnian terms, *‘umrān* and *bada-wiyya*. Recently, an alternative vision of the empire has instead highlighted the concepts of “polycentricity” and “connectivity”. This helps us to consider political structuration as a multi-scalar process producing “layered” and “overlapping” sovereignties and centralities.¹²

The study of imperial ‘elites’ is at the crossroad of these perspectives. Their extreme mobility throughout the Islamic world and their natural inclination to build professional and cultural networks contributed deeply to the globalization of imperial culture. At the same time, indigenous or local elites competed with the newcomers, who were qualified as ‘Arabs’ or ‘Oriental’. A whole set of social strategies—from distinction to alliance, hybridization or fusion—was available to either integrate the imperial elite or claim its insertion into a local Islamic context.

What kind of ‘elites’ characterized Ibāḍī social organization? The egalitarian and puritanical ethos of the school seems to exclude the use of such commonplace terms as *al-khāṣṣa*, *al-kibār* and *al-a’yān*. The Ibāḍī dignitaries are rather called *shuyūkh*, *aṣḥāb* and *‘ulamā’*, or *a’imma* if they are local religious leaders. The advent of the Rustamid dynasty introduced new political and social distinctions, and the early 10th-century chronicler Ibn Ṣaghīr (who was not an Ibāḍī but lived in Tāhart) described local elites as *kubarā’*, *wujūh* or *ru’asā’*.¹³ The social

¹⁰ Aillet 2011, 74–75.

¹¹ Laroui 1975, I, 67, 70, 81.

¹² Burbank/Cooper 2011; Nef/Tillier 2011.

¹³ Ibn al-Ṣaghīr, *Akḥbār*, 16–17. See the introduction of this volume for a study of the terminology referring to leading groups.

structure of Tāhart was completely different from the highly urbanized and state-controlled 'Irāqī society, but once again, differences should not prohibit us from looking for similarities.

This essay will try to comprehend what could link a seemingly marginal entity with the empire,¹⁴ taking into consideration personal networks, economic relations and cultural circulation. Sources are limited. Apart from well-known Sunni examples of literature, few 9th-century western Ibāḍī sources survive; most authors lived after the 10th century.¹⁵ As for material sources, they are even scarcer.

The Baṣran Connection

In Ibāḍī canonical tradition, the 'Irāqī emporium of al-Baṣra was the cradle and headquarters of the sect, from which its revolutionary wave spread over various provinces to North Africa.¹⁶ While the Baṣran influence over Ibāḍism is unquestionable, the diffusion of the *da'wa* appears to have been much less centralized than was supposed by later authors like the late 11th-century writer Abū Zakariyyā' al-Wārjlānī.

The Baṣran and 'Irāqī legacy deeply imbued Ibāḍī law with late Umayyad and early 'Abbāsīd culture. Such prominent figures as 'Abdallāh b. Mas'ūd and 'Abdallāh b. 'Abbās ranked among the early authorities of the sect, and the key figure of Jābir b. Zayd al-Azdī connected the school with the mainstream thanks to his well-known master Ibn 'Abbās, the famous arbitrator of the conflict between 'Alī and the 'people of Nahrawān'. The "ocean of knowledge" (*baḥr al-'ilm*), as al-Shammākhī called him, had supposedly instructed the first *imām* of al-Baṣra, Abū 'Ubayda Muslim b. Abī Karīma, and therefore linked the Ibāḍī imamology to a continuous line of transmission from the Prophet himself.¹⁷ The Ibāḍī imamate also stemmed from Abū Bilāl Mirdās b. Udayya, a Janus figure who first embodied a quietist attitude (*qa'ada*) towards the Umayyads before choosing the way of the sacrifice (*shirā'*) by facing up to the governor 'Ubaydal-

¹⁴ See the well-documented study of 'Abd al-Ḥalīm 1990 on the relations between western and eastern Ibāḍism and the essay of Dridi (in press).

¹⁵ We have deliberately chosen to refer only to the oldest texts when later sources did not contain relevant material for our purpose.

¹⁶ Wilkinson 2010, 211–219.

¹⁷ See for example al-Shammākhī, *Kitāb al-Siyar*, I, 182–189, and Wilkinson 2010, 163–164.

lāh b. Ziyād (d. 67 H/686 CE) of al-Baṣra, whose army killed him during prayer.¹⁸ His martyrdom legitimized the first revolt of the Khawārij (61 H/680 CE) and Ibn al-Ṣaghīr says that he was also a model for Maghribī Ibādism.¹⁹ His popularity as a symbol of a pious resistance against tyranny even reached ‘Abbāsīd literature.²⁰ Anti-Umayyad arguments circulated widely. In the *Kitāb fihi bad’ al-Islām*, compiled in Tripolitania around 273 H/886–887 CE, Ibn Sallām al-Lawātī relies on traditions attributed to Ṣuhār al-‘Abdī, a disciple of Jābir and teacher of Abū ‘Ubayda, to portray Yazīd b. ‘Abd al-Malik (101–105 H/720–724 CE). This sequence is almost identical to the black legend popularized by the famous Baṣran polygrapher al-Jāhīz (d. 255 H/869 CE) in his *Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*.²¹

The Ibādī vulgate generally asserts that Abū ‘Ubayda, who died during the reign of al-Manṣūr (136–158 H/754–775 CE), organized the propagation of the faith thanks to the five ‘knowledge bearers’ (*ḥamalāt al-‘ilm*) he trained secretly in al-Baṣra. This team allegedly included two future *imāms* (Abū l-Khaṭṭāb al-Ma‘āfirī and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Rustam) and three minor Maghribī figures (‘Aṣīm al-Sadrātī, Ismā‘il b. Darrār and Abū Dāwūd al-Qiblī), and thus allegorized the geographical spread of the sect and the alliance between the east and the west.²² Another ‘monolinear model’ of the sect’s origins shows the obscure Salma b. Sa‘īd leaving al-Baṣra for the Maghrib on the same camel as ‘Ik-rīma, the client of Ibn al-‘Abbās who was supposed to represent the rival Ṣufrī school.²³ This narrative does not reflect the revolutionary period, when the two streams competed for control of Tripolitania. It rather echoes the political stabilization of the twin states of Tāhart and Sijilmāsa. These two legendary tales, never alluded to by Ibn Sallām, thus symbolize the close relationship between eastern and western communities rather than describing a real process.

In the future, critical investigation should focus on the epistolary corpus between the ‘Irāqī *imāms* and the Maghribīs. A *risāla* on *zakāt* attributed to Abū ‘Ubayda was supposedly addressed to Abū l-Khaṭṭāb (140–144 H/757–761 CE),²⁴ and among the recently edited treaties of the Kūfī Ibādī scholar ‘Ab-

18 Ibn Sallām, *Kitāb Ibn Sallām*, 110–111; al-Darjīnī, *Kitāb Ṭabaqāt*, II, 22–34; Gaiser 2010, 89–92.

19 Ibn Sallām, *Kitāb Ibn Sallām*, 13.

20 See for example Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, *al-‘Iqd*, I, 182–185, and al-Mubarrad, *al-Kāmil*, III, 77–82.

21 Ibn Sallām, *Kitāb Ibn Sallām*, 100–101.

22 Abū Zakariyyā’ al-Warjlānī, *Kitāb Siyar*, 57–58.

23 Abū Zakariyyā’ al-Warjlānī, *Kitāb Siyar*, 42–43.

24 Francesca (in press).

dallāh b. Yazīd al-Fazārī (d. after 179 H/795 CE) there may be an answer to the Maghribī theological controversy against the competing Mu‘tazilī school.²⁵

Ibn Sallām, a well-informed author whose grandfather was a Berber veteran of the first revolts in North Africa and a companion of Abū l-Khaṭṭāb,²⁶ displays a slightly different version of the *da‘wa*. Instead of focusing only on al-Baṣra, he also alludes to its expansion to al-Kūfa, Makka and Madīna, Yaman and ‘Umān, Khwārazm and Khurāsān. Local personalities, some in disagreement with Abū ‘Ubayda, are given equal mention in his book. Far from making al-Baṣra the seat of a centralized structure, he rather conceives his stream as a multipolar organization headed by various autonomous circles of ‘companions’. He insists, for example, on the Egyptian companions, who could have played a key role in the propagation of the movement in the neighboring region of Tripolitania.²⁷ The diffusion of the doctrine and the organization of the revolt must in this version have been more dispersed and multi-focused than tradition asserts.

After the foundation of Tāhart in 160 H/777 CE and until the middle of the 9th century, al-Baṣra was a major economic and cultural partner of the new city. The cradle of a strong Ibādī community, the metropolis of southern al-‘Irāq was also a gateway to the prosperous ‘Abbāsīd market. A famous tale transmitted by Ibn al-Ṣaghīr is a reminder that the first Baṣran delegation arrived soon after the new *imām* had been elected and contributed to finance Tāhart’s initial economic takeoff. When the Baṣrans came back three years later, the city had already become so prosperous it did not need further financing: the west had emancipated itself from the east.²⁸

Relations with al-‘Irāq continued to flourish under the reign of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (168–208 H/784–823 CE), when Baṣran and Kūfan merchants built mansions in Tāhart.²⁹ Al-Rabī‘ b. Ḥabīb al-Azdī al-Farāhidī, the successor of Abū ‘Ubayda, was repeatedly asked for legal advice by the Maghribīs and was also engaged in giving religious support to ‘Abd al-Wahhāb against his adversary Yazīd b. Fandīn and the Nukkārī schismatic opposition.³⁰ His powerful influence on Maghribī law is well reflected by the late compilation of his *Musnad* by Abū Ya‘qūb al-Warjlānī under the name of *Kitāb al-Tartīb*.³¹ According to Ibn Sallām,

25 ‘Abdallāh b. Yazīd al-Fazārī, *Kitāb al-Qadar*, in al-Salimi/Madelung, *Early Ibādī Theology*, 13–29.

26 Aillet 2015a, 69.

27 Ibn Sallām, *Kitāb Ibn Sallām*, 114–115.

28 Ibn al-Ṣaghīr, *Akhbār*, 10–11, 13.

29 Ibn al-Ṣaghīr, *Akhbār*, 13.

30 Abū Zakariyyā‘ al-Warjlānī, *Kitāb Siyar*, 93–94.

31 Abū Ya‘qūb al-Warjlānī, *Kitāb al-Tartīb*.

the Baṣran *imām* was also involved in trade between the east and the west, sending his brother to Tāhart with commodities valued at 12,000 dinars (or dirhams, the author is unclear).³² In his turn, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb was prepared to send 1,000 dinars to al-‘Irāq for the purchase of books, but instead his coreligionists sent him forty packs for free.³³

This close relationship was maintained under Abū Sufyān Maḥbūb b. al-Raḥīl (d. c. 210 H/825 CE), the sixth and last *imām* of al-Baṣra, who presumably moved to ‘Umān at the end of his life. Equally engaged in favour of the Rustamids, he denounced the *khalafī* protest with other Oriental scholars.³⁴ Ibn Sallām also recalls his notorious pilgrimage to Makka. Followed by 150 companions, he pitched his camp in a place called “Maḍārib Maḥbūb” near Minā and offered hospitality to every member of the school, including the Maghribīs.³⁵ His memoir of the sect, the *Kitāb Abī Sufyān*, was very influential on western Ibādī historiography.³⁶

Broader Eastern Connections

The Baghdādī geographer al-Ya‘qūbī, who visited Tāhart during the 880s, reported that the city was “the ‘Irāq of the Maghrib”.³⁷ The ‘Irāqī-Rustamid connections were not limited to al-Baṣra. Ibādī literature portrayed Baghdad as the headquarters of the “tyrants” who sent the *jund* against Abū l-Khaṭṭāb and Abū Hātim under the reign of Abū Ja‘far al-Manṣūr, but a later anecdote suggests that the capital was frequented by the western Ibādī elite. Under the reign of Aflaḥ b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (208–258 H/824–875 CE), his opponent Naffāth b. Naṣr travelled from Jabal Nafūsa to Baghdad and stayed there for a long time, surely while trading. The tale says that al-Mutawakkil (232–247 H/847–861 CE) was subjugated by Naffāth b. Naṣr’s knowledge when he received him for a theological debate. As a reward, he opened his library, where the complete *dīwān* of Jābir b. Zayd was allegedly preserved, to his guest for one day and one night. Naffāth b. Naṣr copied the nine volumes in that time thanks to a squad of scribes. Before

³² Ibn Sallām, *Kitāb Ibn Sallām*, 110.

³³ Abū Zakariyyā’ al-Warjlānī, *Kitāb Siyar*, 102–103.

³⁴ Abū Zakariyyā’ al-Warjlānī, *Kitāb Siyar*, 122–123.

³⁵ Ibn Sallām, *Kitāb Ibn Sallām*, 109.

³⁶ Wilkinson 2010, 161–162.

³⁷ Al-Ya‘qūbī, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, 141–143.

reaching Tripolitania, however, he hid this treasure in a secret place rather than sharing it with his deviant contemporaries.³⁸

Another interesting episode is the captivity of Abū l-Yaqẓān Muḥammad b. Aflah in Mashriq, about which Ibn al-Ṣaghīr gives a precise account while Abū Zakariyyā' is almost silent. The prince was arrested during his pilgrimage by the 'Abbāsīd authorities, who suspected him of preparing a rebellion against them. He was imprisoned and in jail he met and sympathized with the ruling caliph's brother. When the caliph was overthrown, the brother was chosen to succeed him. The chronological context is not precise, but the story should likely be situated around 250 H/864–865 CE, before *imām* Aflaḥ died. If we refer to the 'Abbāsīd history, things become clearer: the ruling caliph was certainly al-Musta'īn (248–252 H/862–866 CE), who imprisoned his brother al-Mu'tazz in Sāmarrā' before being himself overthrown by a powerful Turkish militia. He was then replaced by al-Mu'tazz (252–255 H/866–869 CE). The new sovereign proposed his former companion of captivity stay to govern a province, but the young prince renounced wealth and decided to go home.

Despite the chaotic political life of Sāmarrā' in these years, Abū l-Yaqẓān was apparently fascinated by the strong army, courtly education (*adab*) and “firm government” of the 'Abbāsīds. The chronicle reports that as soon as he was designated *imām* in 254 H/868–869 CE, he began to use an 'Irāqī tent (*sirdaq*) for official ceremonies, a political symbol his Berber subjects had never seen before.³⁹ This anecdote may hint at the gradual influence of the 'Abbāsīd model on the imamate, itself corresponding to the assertion of central authority through the adoption of standard institutions like the *qāḍī*, the *shurṭa*, the *ḥisba*, the personal guard (*al-ḥaras*), the use of slave soldiers and ethnic division in the army. It is noticeable that some decades before Abū l-Yaqẓān, the famous singer Ziryāb introduced 'Irāqī fashion in Cordoba, the capital of the Umayyads who were themselves in good terms with the Rustamids. It is no surprise that quotations from the 'Irāqī polygraphs al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255 H/869 CE) and Ibn Qutayba (d. 276 H/889 CE) were incorporated into Maghribī Ibādī literature.⁴⁰

In Tāhart, two of the most prominent traders of the 860s were a man from al-Wāsiṭ, between Baghdad and al-Baṣra, and another from Sirāf, the great port on the northern shore of the Persian Gulf.⁴¹ There were also some contacts with 'Khurāsānī' elites who were possibly living in al-'Irāq. Abū Ghānim Bishr b. Ghānim al-Khurāsānī reportedly led a delegation to *imām* 'Abd al-Wahhāb in Tāhart.

³⁸ Abū Zakariyyā' al-Warjīlānī, *Kitāb siyar*, 139–142.

³⁹ Ibn al-Ṣaghīr, *Akḥbār*, 27–30.

⁴⁰ Abū Zakariyyā' al-Warjīlānī (*Kitāb Siyar*, 44), relying on earlier sources.

⁴¹ Ibn al-Ṣaghīr, *Akḥbār*, 38–39.

On his way back to Egypt, Abū Ghānim met the *qāḍī* ‘Amrūs b. Fatḥ in Jabal Nafūsa and gave him a copy of the twelve volumes of his great juridical compilation, called the *Mudawwana*.⁴² Conversely, a scholar named Abū ‘Īsā Ibrāhīm b. Ismā‘īl al-Khurāsānī received a delegation from ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and denounced his opponent Khalf b. al-Samḥ in an epistle.⁴³ We also know, thanks to al-Ya‘qūbī, that small communities of Khurāsānī Persians (‘*ajam*’) were hosted in Zawīla or Qayrawān.⁴⁴

It is no wonder that Tāhart was described by eastern travelers and geographers like Ibn Khurradādhbih around 232 H/845 CE, al-Ya‘qūbī in the 880s, and al-Istakhri a few years before the Fāṭimid conquest.⁴⁵ Western Ibādī elites were culturally and economically well connected with the ‘Abbāsīd realm and ‘Irāqī traders had settled in the main urban centers. The first local dynasties in the west were proud to display Oriental genealogies, and it is noticeable that at roughly the same period the newly established ‘Alid dynasty of the Idrīsids founded the city of ‘al-Bašra’ between Tangier and Fez.⁴⁶

Archaeological studies have recently outlined the artistic and material expressions of this relationship. The French archaeologist Chloé Capel has proved that the local wadi of Sijilmāsa was in fact an important artificial canal created to supply water to the Midrārid city, and which closely parallels contemporary ‘Irāqī hydraulic structures.⁴⁷ Our research project on the archaeological site of Sedrata also provides late evidence for these cultural contacts. Sedrata, or the medieval city of Wārjlān, was a major Ibādī crossroads for Trans-Saharan trade from the 10th to the 13th centuries, situated as it was eight kilometers south of Wargla (Algeria). Patrice Cressier and Sophie Gilotte have shown, using the work of Marguerite van Berchem, that the aesthetic program displayed in the stucco panels of the so-called ‘palace’ at this site (one of the excavated mansions) was mainly influenced by the art of Sāmarrā’ and other ‘Abbāsīd establishments in 9th-century al-‘Irāq and western Iran. Although these panels were probably not completed before the 11th century, their seemingly archaic program could be explained by the Rustamid legacy.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, we know al-

42 Al-Shammākhī, *Kitāb al-Siyar*, II, 369.

43 Ibn Sallām, *Kitāb Ibn Sallām*, 138–139; al-Shammākhī, *Kitāb al-Siyar*, 293, 319.

44 Al-Ya‘qūbī, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, 134–138.

45 Ibn Khurradādhbih, *Kitāb al-Masālik*, 87–88; al-Ya‘qūbī, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, 141–143, 149–150; al-Istakhri, *Kitāb al-Masālik*, 39.

46 Eustache 1955.

47 Capel 2016.

48 Cressier/Gilotte (in press).

most nothing about the material culture of Tāhart, whose archaeological site is still not correctly identified.⁴⁹

‘Persians’ in a Berber Land

Al-Baṣra and al-‘Irāq were places where Iranian culture had been integrated into the Islamic imperial structure, but also places where the new converts did not necessarily identify with the Arabs and could combine adherence to Islam with the assertion of a Persian identity. Since the end of the 7th century, the Khārījī and Ibādī movements had advocated for precisely such a cultural distinction within the larger Islamic framework. While in Yaman, they stood with Qaḥṭān against ‘Adnān, in eastern provinces such as Fārs, Kirmān, Sistān, Khwārazm, Khurāsān, and others, they mainly supported the social and political demands of the ‘Persians’ against the ‘Arabs’ or the ‘Quraysh’, who were accused of imposing their own hegemony over Muslim converts. In this stream, *shu‘ūbī* discourse was a literary game,⁵⁰ but also a form of protest against caliphal power.⁵¹

The first generation of Ibādī leaders in Maghrib was apparently affiliated with Southern Arabian tribes, like most of their Baṣran fellows: Abū l-Khaṭṭāb al-Ma‘āfirī was a “Yamanī” and Abū Ḥātim al-Malzūzī a “Tujibī” and a *mawla* of Kinda, according to al-Shammākhī.⁵² Yet the movement was soon associated with the Berbers, and in his proselytizing treaty Ibn Sallām purposely placed the ‘Arabs’ of the *jund* (the ‘Men in Black’ or ‘Abbāsīd party) in opposition to the ‘Muslims’ and the ‘Berbers’, whom he identified with the Ibādī community. While the ‘Arabs’ were accused of corrupting Islam and tyrannizing over their subjects, the Berbers were shown as legitimate owners of the country and sincere Muslims.⁵³ This dichotomy, which became a leitmotif in early western Ibādī sources, echoed the well-known Oriental controversy against the Berbers. In the second half of the 8th or early 9th centuries, the Ibādīs produced their own *ḥadīths* in response to imperial dismissal of the Berbers as uncivilized subjects and false or bad Muslims. This ‘black legend’ of the Berbers reflects the ideological struggle led by the ‘Irāqī authority against the anti-caliphal Ibādī and Ṣufrī movements.

⁴⁹ See the first survey by Marçais/Dessus-Lamare 1946 and, among other references, the overview of Dangel 1977, 39–44.

⁵⁰ Mottahedeh 1976; Norris 1990; Enderwitz 1997.

⁵¹ Gibb 1962, 69.

⁵² Al-Shammākhī, *Kitāb al-Siyar*, II, 245, 258.

⁵³ Aillet 2015a, 77–79.

Conversely, the *ḥadīths* compiled by Ibn Sallām were the counterpart of those circulating in contemporary ‘Abbāsīd literature.⁵⁴

A *ḥadīth* popularized by Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241 H/855 CE) shows how the Prophet anathematized the Berbers and accused them of hypocrisy. The final words echo the final sentence against the Khawārij,⁵⁵ whose faith “**will not pass beyond their throats**”.⁵⁶

A man came and seated down close to the Prophet—God’s peace and blessings be upon him—and the Messenger of God asked him: “Where do you come from?” He answered: “I am a Berber.” Then, the Messenger of God—God’s peace and blessings be upon him—gave him this order: “Go far from me!” and asked everybody around him to do the same. After he stood up, the Messenger of God—God’s peace and blessings be upon him—came to us and declared: “Their faith does **not pass beyond their throats.**”

Not surprisingly, the opposite side presents the Berbers very differently. Their primitiveness is turned into ascetic purity and religious sincerity. They appear as the new chosen people who will regenerate western Islam, as opposed to the Arabs who are accused of creating the *fitna* and perverting the religion in its native land.⁵⁷

One day, as she was seated with twelve members of the Muhājirūn and Anṣār, a Berber came in. ‘Ā’isha stood up and stayed alone with him, while the others had to move out reluctantly. She gave answers (*istafatā*) to whatever the Berber needed and he went out. After that, she sent someone to seek them out in their houses, so they came back to her. “Why did you go away from me with anger?” she asked them. “We were angry against this man. A Berber came to us, a man we all despise because we hate his group, but you gave your preference to him over us, and even to him over you,” they replied. “I gave him my preference over you and me because the Prophet—God’s peace and blessings be upon him—told me something about them,” ‘Ā’isha said. “And what did the Prophet of God tell you about them?” they asked. “Do you know anybody from the Berbers?” she replied. “Yes, we do.” Then ‘Ā’isha said: “I was seated with the Prophet one day when this Berber came to us, with his face yellow and his eyeballs sunken. The Prophet of God—God’s peace and blessings be upon him—stared at him and told him: “What is wrong with you? Do you have any problems? Are you sick? Yesterday, when you went to bed your blood was pure and your color sane, and now you seem to have awoken from the grave!” The Berber answered: “I was preoccupied by a very serious concern.” “What concern?” the Prophet asked. “Yesterday, you glanced at me in such a way that I feared a verse of God would descend.” Then he told him—God’s peace and blessings be upon him: “Don’t be afraid, I looked at you yesterday in such a manner because Jibrīl—peace upon him—came and told me: ‘Muḥammad,

54 Analysis in Aillet 2015a, 77–78.

55 Al-Sabi’i 1999.

56 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, XIV, 402.

57 Ibn Sallām, *Kitāb Ibn Sallām*, 121–122.

you must only trust the fear of God (*taqwā*) and the Berbers!’ The Prophet said: ‘Then I asked Jibrīl: Who are these Berbers?’ He said: ‘This group.’ He pointed at you, so I looked and asked: ‘Why?’ He answered: ‘Because they will give a new life to the religion of God after its death and revitalize it when it will be ruined. Oh Muḥammad! The religion of God was born in the Ḥijāz and its cradle was in Medina. It was weak at its birth, but it will strengthen and grow. It will become huge and give as many fruits as a tree does. Then it will decay like the trees. At this time, the religion of God will have its crown in North Africa, a heavy and high crown, while nothing will grow from the middle to the roots of it. The crown will be the only part that will grow up.’

The reference to Berber nativeness was apparently not sufficient to support the state-building project fostered by the Rustamids, who became the first lasting autonomous dynasty in North Africa. According to Ibn al-Ṣaghīr, the first *imām*, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, was chosen precisely because he was a stranger, foreign to any local tribe or *‘aṣabiyya*: this distance from local interests was thought to be a condition for governing impartially.⁵⁸ The first *imām* was therefore a ‘Persian’ in a Berber land. The Rustamids kept on claiming their Persian identity,⁵⁹ unlike the Umayyads of Cordoba and the Idrīsids of Fez who chose to stress their Arab origins. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Rustam was probably from al-‘Irāq, like many other Ibādī leaders. His *nisba* ‘al-Fārisī’ may also have meant that he came from the province of Fārs,⁶⁰ where Khārijism was strong up until his time. According to al-Ya‘qūbī, his descendants were clearly labelled ‘Persians’ and constituted the ruling elite in Tāhart.⁶¹ As for Ibn Khurradādhbih, he described the *imām* as “a Persian whom they saluted like a caliph”.⁶² Nobody paid attention to the name of the dynasty (Rustum or Rustam), which clearly refers to the legendary Iranian hero who became a major protagonist of the 10th-century Persian literary monument, the *Shāhnāmeḥ*.

This could be a detail if Abū Zakariyyā’ al-Wārjlānī and later authors had not forged a mythical genealogy for the Rustamids,⁶³ one reproduced with some variations by the Andalūsī writers Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456 H/1064 CE) and al-Bakrī (d. 487 H/1094 CE).⁶⁴ In this pattern, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Rustam was made a descendant of the pre-Islamic Persian ‘kings of kings’. This included the paradigmatic imperial figures of Ardashīr, Sābūr, Bahrām, Yazdajird, Anūshirwān and

58 Ibn al-Ṣaghīr, *Akhbār*, 9.

59 Aillet 2011, 68–73.

60 First documented in Ibn Sallām, *Kitāb Ibn Sallām*, 127.

61 Al-Ya‘qūbī, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, 141–143.

62 Ibn Khurradādhbih, *Kitāb al-Masālik*, 87–88.

63 Abū Zakariyyā’ al-Wārjlānī, *Kitāb Siyar*, 58–60.

64 Ibn Ḥazm, *Kitāb Jamharat*, 511–512; al-Bakrī, *Kitāb al-Masālik*, 66–69.

evidently Khosrow. In the *Kitāb al-Siyar* of Abū Zakariyyā', this genealogy is associated with tales predicting the fall of the Sasanians, the advent of Islam and the rebirth, some generations later, of a Persian dynasty. Evidently, this is an allusion to the 'manifestation' of the imamate in Tāhart. The local and somewhat marginal dynasty of the Rustamids is therefore transformed into the heir of the glorious dynasty of Persia and thus given imperial ancestry.

In this construction, the *fadā'il al-furs* inherited from the eastern *shu'ūbī* tradition are combined with the local formula of the *fadā'il al-Barbar*. This emergence can be traced through Ibn Sallām. Tāhart and the imamate had been founded thanks to an alliance between the indigenous population (the Berbers) and the newcomers (the Persians), whose prestigious origin would later be elaborated upon. What is interesting for our purpose is that the *shu'ūbī* controversy, which called for the reevaluation of political functions in Persian lands, was imported to the Maghrib and hybridized with a Khārijite political discourse against the domination of the 'Arabs'. We lack early evidence to prove that the Rustamids themselves developed this argument before their fall. Ibn al-Ṣaghīr, for instance, does not mention it. However, other elements, like the cosmopolitan image of Tāhart as a crossroads between the east and the west, the *bilād al-Sūdān* and the Mediterranean,⁶⁵ or the above mentioned reference to the caliphal ambition of the *imāms* by Ibn Khurradādhbih, could fit with this idea.

What is clear is that the Sasanian genealogy of the Rustamids reached al-Andalus during the first part of the 11th century, probably conveyed by the Ibāḍīs themselves. Ibn Ḥazm was in touch with Wahbī and Nukkārī informers and al-Bakrī used the former *Kitāb Masālik Ifrīqiya wa-mamālikihā* written by the Qayrawānī scholar Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Warrāq (d. 363 H/973–974 CE). Al-Warrāq was well informed about Tāhart and the Ibāḍīs, and he also gave the Rustamids a Sasanian genealogy. We can reasonably suppose that this discourse was forged by the imamate itself during the 9th century, perhaps to reinforce the authority of the rulers against internal opposition. This kind of political claim was certainly not accepted by the whole Ibāḍī nebula—Ibn Sallām did not mention it, for instance—and the earlier egalitarian and ascetic ethos of the school survived through tales depicting 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Rustam as a humble meason of the community.⁶⁶

What is suggestive for our purposes is how the Persian *shu'ūbī* argumentation was projected far to the west, inspiring the Berber *shu'ūbiyya*. The circulation of such political and genealogical concepts was clearly facilitated by contact

65 Ibn al-Ṣaghīr, *Akhbār*, 13.

66 Ibn al-Ṣaghīr, *Akhbār*, 10–12.

between the eastern and western branches of the movement. As al-Ya‘qūbī observed during his travels, in their attempt to compete with the ‘Arab’ elites, the Berbers—mostly part of Ibāḍism at this time—had the choice of various genealogical combinations. Indeed, among the Hawwāra the local genealogical market included references to Qays ‘Aylān as well as to Yamanī tribes.⁶⁷ The western Ibāḍī combination of two *shu‘ūbiyyas* was possibly intended to symbolize the alliance of the greatest non-Arabic Muslim nations of the time. It is also a good illustration of how social actors could hybridize imperial culture with local structures to produce political autonomy.

Trading with the Empire

The intra-community circulation of persons and ideas between the east and the west was itself embedded into a much wider relationship between the empire and its western confines. Sectarian and ethnic distinctions did not prevent the Ibāḍī from participating in a much larger economic network.

Historiographical tradition has mainly insisted on Tāhart as a bridgehead between the Mediterranean and the Sahel.⁶⁸ Ibn al-Ṣaghīr, himself a local merchant, describes the flourishing city opening “the roads to the land of the Sūdān and to all the countries of east and west to trade and all kinds of goods”.⁶⁹ Tāhart certainly contributed to the awakening or revival of commercial relations between the Mediterranean and the Sūdān.

Ibn al-Ṣaghīr records the embassy led to the “king of Sūdān” by Muḥammad b. ‘Arfa, the right-hand man of *imām* Abū Bakr b. Aflaḥ (250–254 H/864–868 CE), and the projected travel to Gao of Aflaḥ b. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb.⁷⁰ He also frequently alludes to the presence of slaves surrounding the *imām*, the wealthy patricians and the tribal leaders of Tāhart, which thus clearly appears to be a hub for this trade.⁷¹ The increase of commercial relations with the Sahel was itself a response to the huge economic demands created by the empire since the 8th century. In Ibn al-Ṣaghīr’s description of Tāhart, the Sahelian vocation of the city is closely associated with its nodal function between the Maghrib and the Mashriq.

⁶⁷ Al-Ya‘qūbī, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, 131–135.

⁶⁸ Lewicki 1965.

⁶⁹ Ibn al-Ṣaghīr, *Akhbār*, 13.

⁷⁰ Ibn al-Ṣaghīr, *Akhbār*, 31; al-Wisyanī, *Siyar*, II, 328.

⁷¹ For example in Ibn al-Ṣaghīr, *Akhbār*, 13, 27, 48.

Above all, Tāhart was in fact an emporium where various commercial roads converged and fanned out again towards other markets, a pivotal place capitalizing on its relations with the Western Maghrib (including Sijilmāsa), the Berber hinterland, al-Andalus and Ifrīqiya.⁷² In brief, it connected the empire with its western and Saharan confines.

During the 9th century, it seems that the Ibāḍī commercial network was still a juxtaposition of segmented regional circuits magnetized by the Mediterranean and eastern demand. What we know about the network developed by Tāhart is enhanced by the information provided by the *Kitāb fīhi bad' al-Islam* of Ibn Sallām, which exclusively focuses on the eastern Ibāḍī network from Ifrīqiya to the east. The author's subjects mainly came from Surt and Jabal Nafūsa, and practiced trade as well as intellectual exchange. Even if Ibn Sallām does not mention it, the Nafūsīs were in contact with the Trans-Saharan road leading to the cluster of oases of the Fazzān, and had possibly already reached the northern shore of Lake Chad.⁷³ Al-Ya'qūbī refers to Zawila as the main locations of the slave trade and says that people from al-Baṣra, al-Kūfa and Khurāsān, three areas where Ibāḍism was also rooted, had settled there.⁷⁴

Coming back to the personalities Ibn Sallām mentions, in the west their business activity reached Ifrīqiya and the Jarīd and was in contact with the trading sphere of Tāhart. To the east, they mainly frequented Egypt and the Ḥijāz. The first meeting place of the western Ibāḍīs and the imperial sphere was Qayrawān, where some of their wealthiest coreligionists lived. One of them owned a street of stores along the Great Mosque, and another was based in the Sūq al-Aḥad and traded in wheat, barley, olive oil, cotton and other crops with the Hawwāra Berbers.⁷⁵ The Ibāḍī merchant-scholars were also familiar with Fustāṭ, where one of them supervised the Sūq al-Ẓuhr.⁷⁶ This Egyptian metropolis formed the junction of the western and eastern Ibāḍī communities.

The pilgrimage to Makka provided another opportunity for commercial and cultural contact. The western Ibāḍī elites showed their piety as well as their prosperity by repeatedly accomplishing the *ḥajj*.⁷⁷ Ibn Sallām gives precise information on this. The Nafūsīs, for example, went assiduously. Later sources also de-

72 Baḥāz 2010, 230–288.

73 For other publications of the Fazzān project, see Mattingly 2013.

74 Al-Ya'qūbī, *Kitāb al-Buldān*, 134–135.

75 Ibn Sallām, *Kitāb Ibn Sallām*, 132–135.

76 Ibn Sallām, *Kitāb Ibn Sallām*, 109–110, 114–115.

77 'Abd al-Ḥalīm 1990, 88–93.

scribe the Nafūsīs coming to al-Ḥijāz in huge family processions;⁷⁸ one tale even reports that during a single trip 800 male children were born.⁷⁹

This circulation reflected a precise economic system, regarding which we are very poorly informed. The main question, naturally, is the role played by the Ibāḍīs of the west in the supply of commodities from the *bilād al-Sūdān* to the empire, namely gold, slaves, ivory and so on. In the 9th century, Ibāḍī and Sunni sources mainly mention the slave trade without specifying its destination. It is tempting to hypothesize that this specific commercial network corresponded with the cartography of human circulation we have already sketched out. Some clues seem to indicate that the Ibāḍīs of the west were among the most relevant actors in the global trade in African slaves.⁸⁰ The Aghlabid army and some of the great estates in Ifrīqiya were making use of black slaves,⁸¹ who also fought in the special troops of Aḥmad b. Ṭūlūn.⁸² As for al-Ḥijāz, it was a major market for African slaves and a significant black minority worked in the mines there.⁸³ Finally, the rebellion of the Zanj between 255 H–270 H/869–883 CE sheds light on the massive use of black slaves in al-Baṣra and southern al-‘Irāq, in particular for agricultural tasks.⁸⁴ Even if the ethnonym ‘Zanj’ normally designates the populations from Eastern Africa, the close relationship between al-Baṣra and the Ibāḍī realm in the Maghrib during the end of the 8th and the beginning of the 9th century hints at the internal diversity of this poorly identified population. The Zanj possibly included slaves supplied by the Ibāḍī network.

Conclusion

Anti-caliphal ideology certainly contributed to shape the Rustamid state of Tāhart, and above all its memory, as a counter-model. Yet the definition of western Ibāḍism cannot be dismissed as marginal and its relationship with the imperial sphere should be reexamined. Far from simply representing, as caliphal sources claimed, the promotion of a ‘Berber’ ethnicity against an ‘Arab’ or imperial identity, western Ibāḍism was influenced by the eastern model of the Persian *shu‘ū-*

78 Ibn Sallām, *Kitāb Ibn Sallām*, 109–110.

79 ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm 1990, 91.

80 This issue deserves a specific study; this paper only formulates preliminary hypotheses that illustrate how North African Ibāḍism was entangled with the imperial economic system.

81 Talbi 1982, 212; Thiry 1995, 513; Trabelsi, 61–62.

82 *EP*, “Aḥmad b. Ṭūlūn” (M. Gordon).

83 Power 2012, 142.

84 Popovic 1999.

biyya. The imamate itself thus came to symbolize a Persian state rooted in a Berber milieu. The city of Tāhart was hailed as the “‘Irāq of the Maghrib” and the local state apparatus even experimented with a gradual influx of ‘Abbāsīd models. Trade and exchange also played a key role in connecting the Ibādī network with the east, thanks to such nodal points as Qayrawān, Fustāṭ, Makka and al-Baṣra. Thanks to the close relationship between Tāhart and al-Baṣra, Ibādī merchants circulated widely between the ‘Abbāsīd realm and its western fringes. The Maghribīs owned stores in Fustāṭ and traveled as far as Baghdad and Sāmarrā’. Trans-Saharan trade itself was probably additionally boosted by the imperial demand for slaves. Connections with the empire therefore irrevocably shaped ‘transregional elites’ within the North African Ibādī milieu.

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